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THE MADERA COUNTY HISTORIAN

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CHOWCHILLA RIVER PREHISTORY

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Plate 1: Aerial view of archaeological diggings at the Schwabacher site, an old Indian village adjacent to the Chowchilla River. (Photo courtesy of the Madera Tribune).

Each summer since 1967, the dry hills near old Buchanan have been "invaded" by small armies of archaeologists. Sponsored by the U.S. National Park Service, anthropology students and research specialists have migrated annually to the Chowchilla River Basin where Buchanan Reservoir (now under construction) will soon obliterate all traces of ancient and recent history.

The task confronting these archaeologists was immense: to learn everything possible about the lives of the now-vanished Indians of the Buchanan vicinity. How long ago did they first settle in the area? Where did they locate their villages? What sort of houses did they build? Did they trade with people in other regions? What did these Indians eat? How did they dress? Did they suffer from identifiable diseases? What can be learned of their ceremonies and beliefs? Did their culture change through time and, if so, why?

These and countless related questions have now been answered, at least in part, through the persistent efforts of the archaeological excavators.

Sixty-six Miwok Indian camp and village sites, along with nearly 3400 bedrock mortars (acorn-grinding holes) were discovered within the area to be flooded by the new dam. Most of these places were fairly small, probably having been occupied by not more than two or three families. However, other sites were of exceptional size. At one ancient village there were remnants of at least 25 native houses, and cultural debris as much as eight feet deep was visible over an area of several acres.

Most of the houses had been circular structures, about 10 to 12 feet across, constructed of poles, thatch, and mud over a shallow pit dug into the earth. The centuries-old house pits and clay floors are still plainly visible when archaeological excavations take place today.

Interestingly, the earthen floors of great ceremonial houses (measuring 35 to 60 feet across) were also discovered, but only at the largest village sites. It is believed that these large buildings were the places where important dances and assemblies were held. One can imagine that visitors from every small hamlet for miles around would have periodically treked to the main settlement for sacred dances and cult rituals. The central villages with their public buildings and proximity to numerous smaller encampments must have resembled in miniature the clusters of modern cities and their suburbs.

By means of a rather complicated method known as "radiocarbon age determination," it was learned that the Chowchilla River Basin was first permanently inhabited around 200 B.C. It is quite possible, though, that Indians visited the area considerably before then on hunting or trading expeditions. We know, for example, that Indian bands were hunting in the primordial marshlands around Fresno by 2000 B.C., and it is probable that some of these people would have explored the nearby foothills. But any evidence of such early happenings in Madera County has escaped the detection of archaeologists.

Several Indian cemeteries were painstakingly excavated by the archaeologists before the bulldozers arrived. Detailed studies of the human bones revealed that the Buchanan Indians were stocky, muscular people who stood about 5' 6" tall on the average. The skeletons also preserved evidence of various diseases, particularly arthritis, tumors, fused bones, healed fractures, dental cavities and periodontal disease. Arthritis seemingly was exceedingly common among these Indians, as it was among many other California Indian groups.

These afflictions and many others certainly took their toll in terms of suffering and death, for we were able to calculate that the life expectancy was only 25.4 years. This figure, by itself, is somewhat misleading. Actually, such a high percentage of people died in infancy and childhood that an individual who reached adulthood could reasonably expect to endure to the ripe old age of 40 or 45 years.

The skeletons held other secrets. We were greatly surprised to discover that nearly half of the adult men had met violent deaths. The numerous arrow and spear points found deeply imbedded in skulls and other bones clearly indicate that warfare (or perhaps intra-village feuding) was commonplace in prehistoric times. In one case, three men--all shot to death by arrows--were found in a common grave. This information suggests that we need to carefully re-evaluate the old stereotypes concerning the tranquility of pre-Spanish Indians in California. Perhaps their society was as strife-ridden and preoccupied with aggression as our own.

However sensational the evidence of fighting, the Indians undoubtedly spent far more of their energies in peaceful domestic pursuits and barter with their neighbors. Men fished, trapped quail and doves, netted waterfowl, and hunted deer, elk, rabbits, antelope, bear and a host of lesser creatures. Women, in turn, gathered acorns, buckeyes, pine nuts, manzanita berries, fungi, roots, bulbs and various seeds--all of which comprised a richly diversified and nutritious diet.

While some foods could be eaten in their natural form, others required extensive preparation. Acorns and buckeyes, for instance, contain poisonous tannic and prussic acids, respectively, which must be removed before the seeds are palatable. The Indian women accomplished this by cracking, shelling, grinding and leaching the seeds--a laborious process which took several hours every few days.

Substantial, comfortable houses were erected of thatch and clay over a circular framework of poles and logs. The floors were excavated a foot or two beneath the outside ground level. Both the floors and walls were finished with thick layers of daub or clay. Apparently everyone assisted in the construction, even children whose hand prints are preserved as "fossils" in the hardened clay.

The Indians of the Chowchilla drainage were self-sufficient not only in matters of diet and housing, but in the manufacture of most tools and utensils as well. Magnificent water-tight baskets were woven of local fibers to be used for storage,

carrying burdens, collecting seeds or toting infants. Baskets were even used for cooking; hot stones dropped into a basket would cause acorn mush to boil within a few seconds.

Stone working was equally well developed. Delicate arrow points and knives were skillfully chipped. Steatite (soapstone) was mined nearby and and carved into dishes, tobacco pipes, arrow straighteners and an endless array of ornaments. Axes and hammers were fashioned of quartzite cobbles from the river bed, and the local granite served nicely for seed-grinding implements. Even bone was worked into an assortment of useful artifacts, namely needles, fish spear points, sharp awls (used in basket making), knife handles and ornaments.

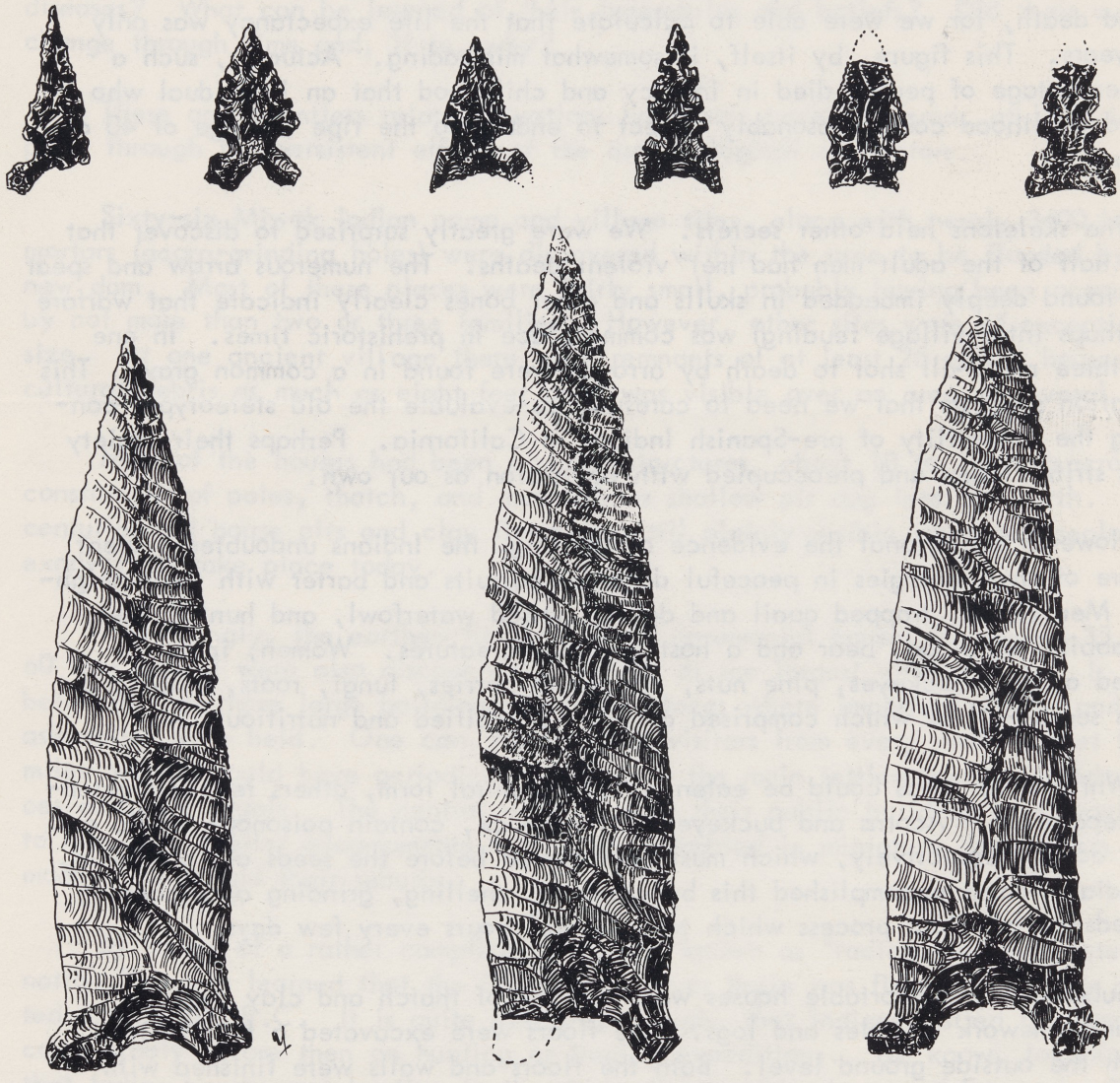

Plate 2: Obsidian arrow and spear points from Chowchilla River archaeological sites. Actual size. (Drawings courtesy of Ron Melander)

While most necessities were locally available, some resources had to be obtained through trade. The most important of these was obsidian, the volcanic glass prized for making arrow points, knives, scrapers, and the like. Laboratory analysis has confirmed that the Chowchilla River Indians obtained all of their obsidian from the Mono Lake area and other sources on the eastern side of the Sierra. Trade was also conducted with people to the west, a fact indicated by the abundant beads and ornaments made of abalone, clam, and olive snail shells which have turned up during the archaeological work.

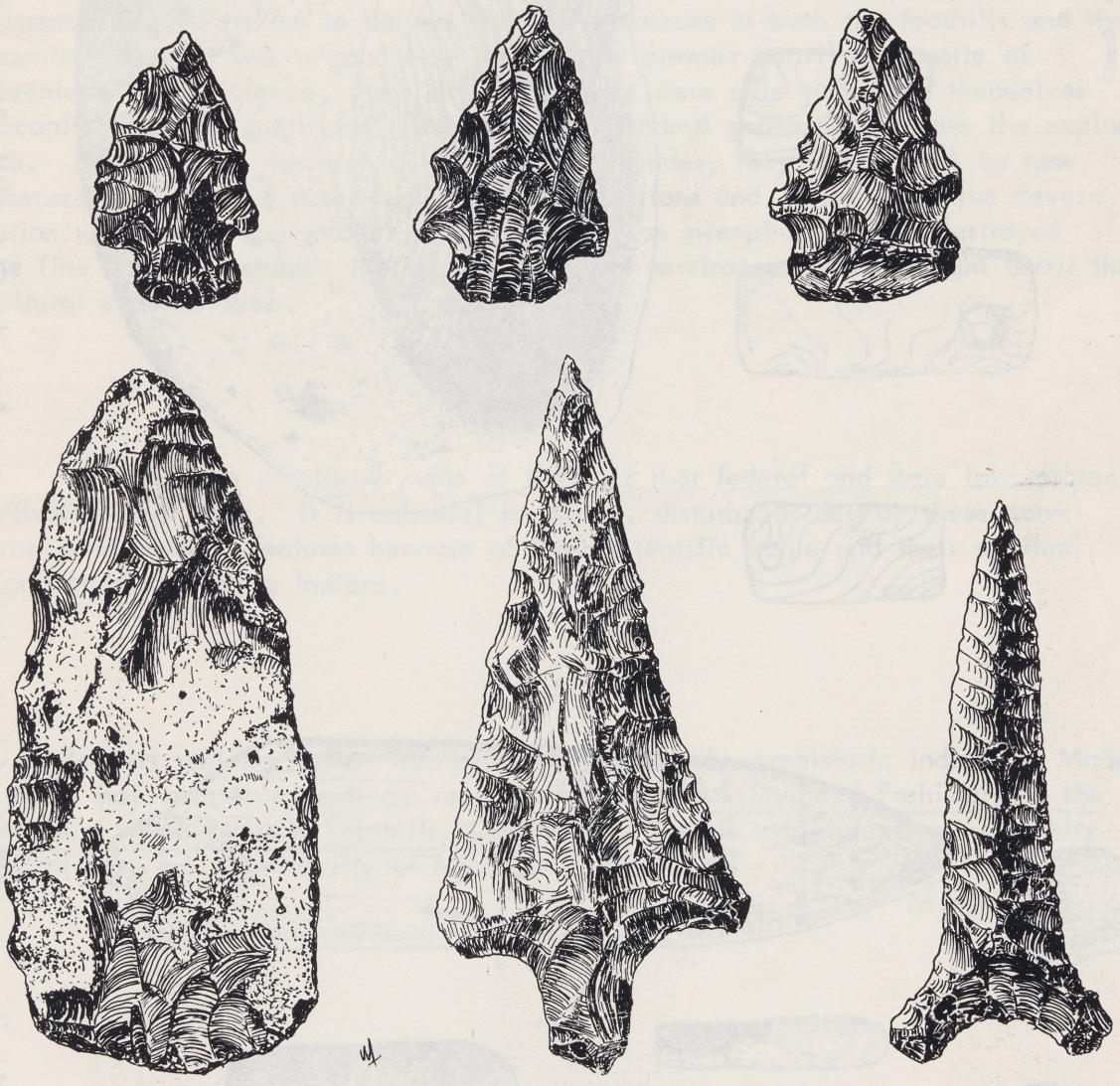

Plate 3: Dart (light spear) points and knife blades of obsidian and chert from the Chowchilla River vicinity. Actual size. (Drawings by Ron Melander)

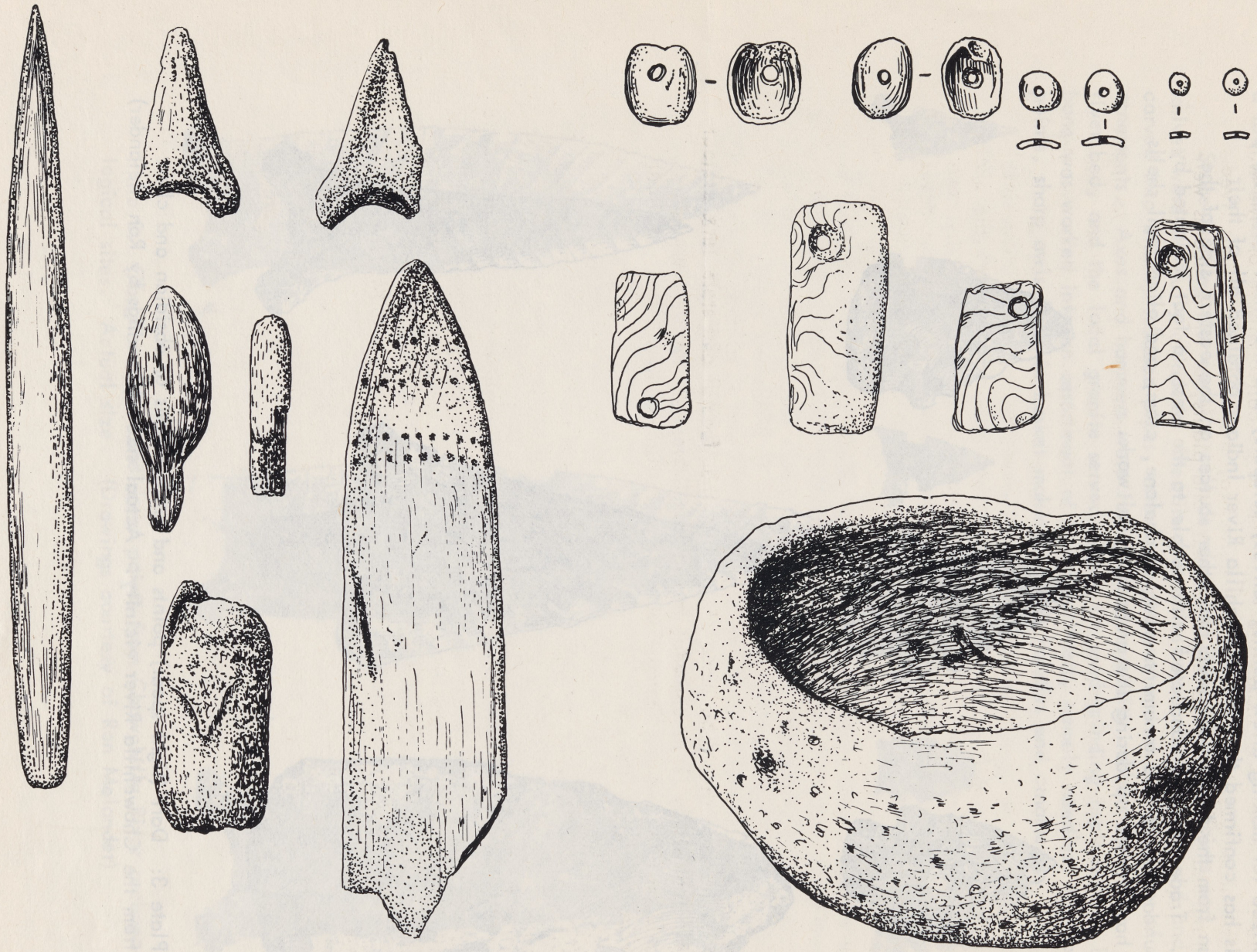

Plate 4: Miscellaneous artifacts of bone, shell, and stone from the Chowchilla River. Included here are a bone awl, a decorated bone "spatulate," olive shell beads, abalone shell ornaments, a soapstone bowl and several antler objects. Natural size. (Drawings by Ron Melander)

In synopsis, archaeologists working along the Chowchilla River have learned that the area around Buchanan was first inhabited some 2000 years ago. The descendants of these early Indian pioneers came to be called Miwok or "Me-wuk" during the historic period. Through the millennia, the Buchanan Indians lived by hunting and gathering a variety of animals and plants, of which acorns were the most important food.

Some or all of the Buchanan Indians may have moved each summer to higher elevations as was the practice when the first whites arrived. This annual "transhumance" allowed them to harvest the best resources of both the foothills and the mountains (and it was a good way to beat the summer heat!). In spite of chronic acts of violence, these diligent people were able to sustain themselves according to their traditional lifeways for a hundred generations before the explorer era. Then, within the span of a few brief decades, they were struck by new diseases, Spanish and American military expeditions and, finally, by the devestation wrought by the gold-crazed '49ers. These sweeping changes destroyed the fine balance between the Indians and their environment and brought about their cultural extermination.

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Brief mention should be made of the fact that federal and state laws protect archaeological sites. It is unlawful to dig in, disturb, or destroy these non-renewable cultural features because of their scientific value and their spiritual significance to living Indians.

* * *

Readers seeking further information regarding the prehistoric Indians of Madera County may wish to consult my recent publication, A Study of Prehistory in the Southern Sierra Nevada Foothills, California. This is available from University Microfilms, Inc., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

M.J.M.

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Our office was privileged recently to preview a set of 4 pen and ink drawings enclosed in a folio entitled "A Quiet Journey Home" by Deborah Cavin. The drawings were "the old Court House, the old Library, the old City Hall and the S.P. Depot". The pictures are 11" x 14", suitable for framing. The Artist, is Deborah Cavin, daughter of Clyde Cavin of Oakhurst. Deborah has done other folio's of historical spots. If you are interested in securing any of these pictures write to Deborah Cavin, 93614 Hwy. 41, Coarsegold, Calif. or inquire at Paul Jones Gift Shop in Madera, Calif.

An inquiry has been received from Glenn Smale from Santa Rosa asking for information on "Thure Theodore Strombeck". This is early history, 1852. He was known as "Swede Bill". We would like to help Mr. Smale and also a real interesting story could result from this information. Write to the Society office and we will forward all information to Mr. Smale.

Correction

In the last issue of the Historian, Page 4, under postmasters; it should read J.G. Smale, not J.C.

New Book

The Historical Society Office has received a publication by William J. Wallace, Dept. of Archaeology, California State University, Long Beach, 1970 Contributions to California Archaeology No. 7 Hidden Reservoir, Madera County. Especially interesting are the two dams being constructed. The book is well illustrated, maps, drawings and photos of arifacts found. The cover is a full page photo of the Adobe Store and Savage Monument.

The Madera County Historical Society is very happy to present another guest writer, Mr. Michael J. Moratto, Associate Professor of Anthropology, San Francisco State University. It is especially appropriate at this time to have a story on one of the two dam sites in Madera County. Both dams will be under construction within a few weeks. Gratitude is expressed through this Historian to Mr. Moratto, by the membership of the Madera County Historical Society.

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